

Characteristics of Effective Health Education Curricula

One of the key parameters of the SDHES requires that the standards and performance indicators be based on research that identifies those characteristics of curricula that most positively influence students' health practices and behaviors. Today's health education curricula reflect the growing body of research that emphasize

- Teaching functional health information (essential knowledge)
- Shaping personal values and beliefs that support healthy behaviors
- Shaping group norms that value a healthy lifestyle
- Developing the essential skills necessary to adopt, practice, and maintain health-enhancing behaviors.

Less effective curricula overemphasize teaching scientific facts and increasing student knowledge.

According to reviews of effective programs and curricula and experts in the field of health education, [an effective health education curriculum has the following characteristics.](#)

- **Focuses on clear health goals and related behavioral outcomes**

Instructional strategies and learning experiences are directly related to the behavioral outcomes.

- **Is research-based and theory-driven**

Instructional strategies and learning experiences build on theoretical approaches, such as social cognitive theory, and social inoculation theory, that have effectively influenced health-related behaviors among youth. The most promising curricula go beyond the cognitive level and address social influences, attitudes, values, norms, and skills that influence specific health-related behaviors.

- **Addresses individual values, attitudes, and beliefs**

Instructional strategies and learning experiences motivate students to critically examine personal perspectives, thoughtfully consider new arguments that support health-promoting attitudes and values, and generate positive perceptions about protective behaviors and negative perceptions about risk behaviors.

- **Addresses individual and group norms that support health-enhancing behaviors**

Instructional strategies and learning experiences help students accurately assess the level of risk-taking behavior among their peers (e.g., how many of their peers use illegal drugs), correct misperceptions of peer and social norms, and reinforce health enhancing attitudes and beliefs.

- **Focuses on reinforcing protective factors and increasing perceptions of personal risk and harmfulness of engaging in specific unhealthy practices and behaviors**

Curricula provide opportunities for students to validate positive health-promoting beliefs, intentions, and behaviors. It provides opportunities for students to assess their vulnerability to health problems, actual risk of engaging in harmful health behaviors and exposure to unhealthy situations.

- **Addresses social pressures and influences**

Curricula provide opportunities for students to analyze personal and social pressures to engage in risky behaviors, such as media influence, peer pressure, and social barriers.

- **Builds personal, social competence, and self-efficacy by addressing skills**

Curricula build essential skills including communication, refusal, assessing accuracy of information, decision making, planning and goal setting, self control, and self management that enable students to build personal confidence, deal with social pressures and avoid or reduce risk-taking behaviors. For each skill, students are guided through a series of developmental steps. Those steps are:

1. Discussing the importance of the skill, its relevance, and relationship to other learned skills.
2. Presenting steps for developing the skill.
3. Modeling the skill.
4. Practicing and rehearsing the skill using real-life scenarios.
5. Providing feedback and reinforcement.

- **Provides functional health knowledge that is basic, accurate, and directly contributes to health-promoting decisions and behaviors**

Curricula provide accurate, reliable, and credible information for usable purposes so students can assess risk, clarify attitudes and beliefs, correct misconceptions about social norms, identify ways to avoid or minimize risky situations, examine internal and external influences, make behaviorally

relevant decisions, and build personal and social competence. A curriculum that provides information for the sole purpose of improving knowledge of factual information will not change behavior.

- **Uses strategies designed to personalize information and engage students**

Instructional strategies and learning experiences are student centered, interactive, and experiential. The strategies include group discussions, cooperative learning, problem solving, role playing, and peer-led activities. Learning experiences correspond with students' cognitive and emotional development, help them personalize information, and maintain their interest and motivation while accommodating diverse capabilities and learning styles. Instructional strategies and learning experiences include methods for the following:

- a. Addressing key health-related concepts.
- b. Encouraging creative expression.
- c. Sharing personal thoughts, feelings, and opinions.
- d. Thoughtfully considering new arguments.
- e. Developing critical thinking skills.

- **Provides age-appropriate and developmentally-appropriate information, learning strategies, teaching methods, and materials**

Curricula address students' needs, interests, concerns, developmental and emotional maturity levels, and current knowledge and skills. Learning is relevant and applicable to students' daily lives. Concepts and skills are covered in logical sequence.

- **Incorporates learning strategies, teaching methods, and materials that are culturally inclusive**

Curricular materials are free of culturally biased information, but also includes information, activities, and examples that are inclusive of diverse cultures and lifestyles such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, physical/mental ability, appearance and sexual orientation. Strategies promote values, attitudes, and behaviors that support the cultural diversity of students; optimize relevance to students from multiple cultures in the school community; strengthen the skills necessary to engage in intercultural interactions; and build on the cultural resources of families and communities.

- **Provides adequate time for instruction and learning**

Curricula provides enough time to promote understanding of key health concepts and practice skills. Behavioral change requires an intensive and sustained effort. A short-term or "one shot" curriculum,

delivered for a few hours at one grade level is generally insufficient to support the adoption and maintenance of healthy behaviors.

- **Provides opportunities to reinforce skills and positive health behaviors**

Curricula build on previously learned concepts and skills and provides opportunities to reinforce health-promoting skills across health topic areas and grade levels. This can include incorporating more than one practice application of a skill, adding "skill booster" sessions at subsequent grade levels, or integrating skill application opportunities in other academic areas. Curriculum that address age-appropriate determinants of behavior across grade levels and reinforces and builds on learning is more likely to achieve longer-lasting results.

- **Provides opportunities to make positive connections with influential others**

Curricula link students to other influential persons who affirm and reinforce health-promoting norms, attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviors. Instructional strategies build on protective factors that promote healthy behaviors and enable students to avoid or reduce health risk behaviors by engaging peers, parents, families, and other positive adult role models in student learning.

- **Includes teacher information and plans for professional development and training that enhances effectiveness of instruction and student learning**

Curricula are implemented by teachers who have a personal interest in promoting positive health behaviors, believe in what they are teaching, are knowledgeable about the curriculum content, and are comfortable and skilled in implementing expected instructional strategies. On-going professional development and training is critical for helping teachers implement a new curriculum or implement strategies that require new skills in teaching or assessment.